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A new sheriff at Port of L.A. takes dead aim at air pollution
Former state energy czar adopts lofty goals for reducing toxics
- James Sterngold, Chronicle Staff Writer

San Pedro, Los Angeles County -- David Freeman has never been one to think small. When he ran the Tennessee Valley Authority under President Jimmy Carter, he halved the sulfur oxide emissions from the country's largest utility, and later, as Gov. Gray Davis' energy czar, helped extricate California from the fallout of the energy crisis by renegotiating punishingly expensive power contracts.

But at 79, Freeman may have now taken on his most ambitious mission yet: slashing pollution from one of the dirtiest industrial sites in the country -- the Port of Los Angeles -- by perhaps 80 percent or more, and soon.

Tough as that may sound, Freeman insists with matter-of-fact confidence, it is just the start. His real goal, he said, is to show how cutting-edge technologies, which he intends to employ aggressively and pioneer at the port, can bring about a radical shift away from fossil fuels by industrial users nationwide. "Ports can lead the way to an end of our dependence on oil," said Freeman, appointed this summer as chairman of Los Angeles' powerful harbor commission. "There is a patriotic commitment to this."

Other California port officials are watching Freeman's efforts closely, and agree that if Freeman can push shippers, truckers and the railroads to adopt new technologies that drastically reduce emissions, it will help their efforts.

"We're also talking about radical changes," said Roberta Reinstein, the manager for air and safety at the Port of Oakland. "We're of a similar mind."

Los Angeles may be better known for Hollywood, but in reality no industry looms larger in the city's economy than its thriving port operations.

Growing rapidly on the back of soaring trade with Asia, the port is one of the largest sources of jobs in the state -- more than 260,000 in Los Angeles County alone, and hundreds of thousands more throughout the region. These range from truckers and stevedores to railroad and warehousing workers, along with thousands of executive positions.

But the port has also become an enormous source of health-threatening emissions, which recent studies by experts at the University of Southern California and UCLA suggest may be getting close to emergency levels. As the air elsewhere in the Los Angeles basin is generally getting cleaner, at the port and the connecting transportation corridor it is getting worse.

Of special concern, according to researchers, are toxic particulates, produced in heavy volumes by diesel engines, which, the researchers say, are causing hundreds of cancer cases every year.

The threat is likely to worsen; container traffic, which has doubled since 1998, is projected to grow perhaps fourfold by 2025.

According to Peter Greenwald, a senior policy adviser to the South Coast Air Quality Management District, which regulates air quality for more than 16 million people in the Los Angeles region, the port emits 25 percent of the diesel particulates in the region, and diesel particulates account for 71 percent of the region's cancer-related emissions.

Even pro-growth officials say there needs to be dramatic change. "What we've been learning about the health issues has just made us readjust our thinking," said Mark Pisano, executive director of the Southern California Association of Governments, a regional planning body. "The changes the (harbor) commission is talking about now are an absolute necessity."

When Antonio Villaraigosa became Los Angeles' mayor in July, he pledged to make the city a leader in adopting green policies. He quickly followed up with the appointment of Freeman, a colorful character rarely without his white cowboy hat, as chairman of the harbor commission.

"The mayor's marching orders to me were double green -- grow the port and clean the air," Freeman said, referring to Villaraigosa's insistence that the port also continue to create jobs. "The price of growth is clean growth. I'm not replacing real dirty with dirty. Am I making myself clear?"

Clarity, in fact, may be one of Freeman's strengths, as was evident when he presided over just his second commission meeting two weeks ago. When the director of the port's environmental efforts, Ralph Appy, proudly described minor reductions of emissions by switching some equipment to cleaner diesel fuel, Freeman cut him off.

"But how much are we still emitting?" Freeman demanded. "Isn't this a drop in the bucket?"

"Yes," Appy stammered. "If you're saying this does not solve our problem, you're right."

Freeman ordered Appy to return to the commission in 45 days with a plan for slashing, not just whittling away, emissions of nitrogen oxides and particulates from the thousands of diesel engines that lift and move containers.

"Let's start acting like our lives depended on it," Freeman said. "Our lives do depend on it."

Appy replied, "We're going to do that."

"Forty-five days," Freeman shot back.

Later, Freeman said he was trying to send a message that the old ways of doing business will not do. Rather than simply reducing diesel emissions, for instance, he wants much cleaner liquefied natural gas engines to replace diesel. He talks of using biofuels and electric motors, and hopes that hydrogen-fueled engines will soon be commercially available. He said he wants the port to push manufacturers to offer clean machinery with the inducement of a huge, ready-made market.

In another typically blunt move, Freeman has all but pushed aside the three-year, 600-page study produced under the previous mayor -- and endorsed by his own staff -- that aimed to roll back port emissions to 2001 levels.

"I mean, if we achieve everything in that report we'd still be at a completely unacceptable level of pollution," Freeman said.

Freeman admits he is issuing such harsh declarations in part to motivate the commission's staff.

"It's hard for those guys to shift gears," he said. "There's an adjustment process under way, but they have no choice. They'll adjust. It's a radical culture change."

Freeman relies on tough language partly because of the limits of his reach.

The Port of Los Angeles shares the enormous harbor here -- the busiest in the country -- with the adjacent Port of Long Beach, which has its own administration. Long Beach officials said they share Freeman's desires, and that they, too, will be watching his actions closely. But as they tick off their own more limited initiatives, allowing companies to buy and sell pollution credits, for instance, it is clear that Freeman is taking a more ambitious approach.

Southern California environmentalists are incredulous, and delighted, if somewhat skeptical that Freeman will succeed. Communities adjacent to the harbor, like San Pedro and Wilmington, have been fighting for years to eliminate truck congestion and to clean up the foul air.

"It was night and day," said Jesse Marquez, executive director of the Coalition for a Safe Environment, in Wilmington, on the differences between the new commission and its predecessors. "That type of discussion never took place before."

Freeman said he realizes he has several constituencies he has to persuade, notably the maritime and industrial companies that use the port. Oceangoing container ships, whose engines burn a particularly dirty form of diesel called bunker fuel, produce 55 percent of the particulates from the port, according to the Air Quality Management District. Company representatives say they share Freeman's basic goals, but technology is not readily available for radical improvements.

"I would take his approach here to be, 'Let's do another extensive evaluation of what technologies are available,' " T.L. Garrett, vice president of the trade group Pacific Merchant Shippers Association, said of Freeman's demands.

Freeman does not see it that way.

"If they think I'm just a study guy they don't know me," he said. "My main point is if it takes 10 years to finally accomplish something real, it's all the more reason to get started yesterday."

Freeman readily concedes that it is not clear how all the reductions will be achieved, or who will pay for them, although a number of technologies are already being used to reduce diesel emissions, by using fuels with lower sulfur content and by employing catalytic converters, for instance.

One change already being implemented involves supplying electricity to the piers so the ships, when they dock, can shut down their diesel engines. The port of Oakland and Long Beach are also employing some of these ideas.

Industrial companies and the port itself have already faced barriers to growth because of litigation, and they understand the potentially ruinous costs of endless court fights.

"The environmentalists have gotten very, very sophisticated, and very good at litigation," said Jack Kyser, chief economist for the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation, a pro-growth public agency.

"This can be a show-stopper, and the port doesn't want to let that happen. So this makes sense from a dollars-and-cents view."

Freeman, as usual, puts it more bluntly. "The shippers know that environmental problems can put a stop to any port expansion, and all these companies want to expand," Freeman said. "It's in their financial interests to help, and I'm making sure they know that."